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LAUDATOR TEMPORIS ACTI

BY HENRY McDONALD SPENCER

THOSE who laud nature and berate man are brothers to the ancestor-worshippers who bemoan the passing of the "good old days." The latter evidently bored the Romans who had a name for them, *Laudator temporis acti*—praiser of past times—and I suppose that they have existed in all ages. When a country becomes sclerotic and the national arteries are hardened, so to speak, as in the case of the Chinese, it is natural to turn to the past with longing gaze. When a man becomes so old that he can expect no further achievement he lives again the days of his youth, and when this condition arrives in peoples as well as individuals it is a sign of decay and approaching dissolution.

The "good old days" are praised for their simplicity and a comparison unfavorable to the present is made because "in our fathers' time life was so much more simple," that "we are sadly degenerating," and "life nowadays with its etc." Now the good old days were neither good nor old. "Days" refers to a period of the world's history and it is obvious that the world is oldest at this moment and that at any previous time it was younger. Nor were the "old" days good either in a clergyman's sense or as to desirability, *i. e.* as one would say "a good man" or "a good time."

It is only the high lights of a faded picture that remain. When we think of the past we think of the bowings and scrapings, the stately courtesy, the lace and ruffles; the noble sense of duty and high courage of the pioneers and reformers, of those who suffered agony that we might

be the better, of those who died to change the very conditions that some ungratefully admire. But we forget that the past was not all a quadrille or a revolution. We remember the cloak thrown in the mud that a queen might step unsoiled to her coach, but we do not think of the unspeakable filth in that mud nor the odor of even the queen's person. We read of the feasts but not of the poor, monotonous diet of every day which made occasional feasting a necessity or at least a welcome change. The most terrible calamity that is known to have befallen the human race was the Black Death, the plague which devastated Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century. Hecker calculates that in the six years when the scourge was at its height, 25,000,000 persons, or one-fourth of the entire population of Europe at the time, perished of the disease. This excessive mortality was due to the unsanitary conditions and low diet of the Middle Ages.

We forget the pain and disease, the darkness and terror, the rack, thumbscrew and stake; the gibbets with their ghastly freight swaying over the highroad; the oppression of all who were weak and dependent; the brutality to women and children, servants, the poor, criminals and the insane.

Less than two hundred years ago men, and women too, were maimed and tortured and broken on the wheel for the pettiest crimes; they were dragged apart by horses, disembowelled or burned for political offenses, for mere differences of opinion as to biblical exegesis. During the Middle Ages tens of thousands of people

were put to death by burning and with the most agonising and protracted torture on the mere suspicion of practicing witchcraft; and, what is more significant, without exciting the slightest sympathy or compassion—such was the heartlessness and callousness of the “good old days.” Catholics and Protestants alike persecuted the suspected with a ferocity unparalleled in Pagan times. Lecky tells of seven thousand who were burned in Treves alone in one year. Popes issued bulls which were responsible for the death of thousands of innocent beings, while Martin Luther was equally bloodthirsty and exclaimed: “I would burn them all.” Calvin in Geneva, Baxter in Scotland, and John Wesley in England, the greatest leaders of religious thought of their respective times, were among the most zealous supporters of this persecution.

We are told that the history of the race is recapitulated in the individual; although this is subject to modification, as from birth our conditions are ameliorated by our elders and we have the benefit of their experience and advice, while the prehistoric man whose development corresponded to the present child had no such boon. He was just as much afraid of the dark as the boy of today and had no one to reassure him. But look at the newborn infant dispassionately, without the parental obsession or the tenderness which the soft helplessness of all young things excites: It simply consists of slobber, noise and appetite. This blind and helpless piece of jelly then is the prototype of that slimy, sightless Thing which, countless ages ago, crawled one summer’s day from the ooze of a tropic river bed. Think of the “natural” instincts of a boy of five who pulls wings from flies out of sheer lust

for cruelty; who eats mud; and then reflect on our ancestors of a corresponding period of development when the “ape and tiger” were not hidden. They truly lived the simple life unhampered by the unholy complexities and artificialities of civilisation. Primitive life as Hobbes says was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” For primitive man there was no sublimity in the night; the dark teemed with fearful monsters, nameless demoniac things. For his pleasures, what orgies of bestiality! What unspeakable abominations must have been his after sleeping off the thirty pounds of raw meat which we are told that he would consume at a sitting! No wonder that women, even prostitutes, are still afraid of men in certain circumstances.

Inorganic nature is cruel, relentless and unforgiving. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. If a “good” man, the father of a dependent family, fall far enough he will break his neck just as surely as will a celibate yeggman in like case. All of these countless, weary ages we have been devising means to escape the penalties imposed on man for the mere privilege of living; to resist nature; to protect ourselves against her terrible judgments and heartless severities. When Wordsworth wrote:

. . . Great God, I'd rather be
A pagan suckled on a creed outworn—
So might I standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

He doubtless was carried away by the feeling of deathless verse that he was making in some cozy library, nor did he reckon that the Pagan would be doing his utmost to keep warm and making a mighty poor job of it.